

## Your ideas needed on fixing economy

By **Ralph Martire**

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Say you were selected by the powers that be to tackle one — but only one — of the major issues confronting Rockford-area families today. You could pick anything, health care, mortgage foreclosures, global warming, whatever you felt most pressing, and you could convene everyone from business leaders and elected officials to John Q. Public to figure things out.

No matter who you are, it would be hard to identify that singular issue which takes precedence over all others. Chances are that after a little careful deliberation, however, you'd settle on finding ways to sustainably grow the local economy as the choice.

Based on the data, it'd be difficult for anyone, regardless of ideology or world-view, to argue.

After all, while the U.S. economy is clearly in the tank, with the national unemployment rate at 9.7 percent, things are worse in Illinois, which is suffering with 11 percent unemployment.

Then there's Rockford, which has the worst unemployment rate of any Illinois city, clocking in at more than 15 percent. Mind you, those figures don't include folks who've been unemployed so long they've given up looking for work, or part-timers that want to be full-time. Considering all that, addressing the local economy seems the logical choice.

The good news is, you won't even have to burn one stamp to make such a convening happen. Just show up at 8 a.m. Wednesday at the EIGERlab, located at 605 W. Fulton Ave. in Rockford, armed with your ideas, questions and concerns about work force and economic development.

That's because the Rockford Jobs Council, Rockford Area Economic Development Council and Boone and Winnebago Workforce Investment Board have joined with the statewide Illinois Works for the Future campaign, to sponsor a community-based forum to grapple with these critical economic issues — right in your backyard. (Space is limited, so RSVP to Trudy Wellman at [twellman@theworkforceconnection.org](mailto:twellman@theworkforceconnection.org) or by phone at 815-395-6638.)

To be clear, this isn't going to be your standard lecture by a bunch of talking heads. The event's sponsors want to solicit input from as many different viewpoints as possible to ensure everyone affected by the challenges in the Rockford-area economy has the opportunity to provide insights into what workers and businesses need to move the region forward. Oh, and please leave all platitudes and jargon at home.

The conference is about developing creative and practical ways to tie job skill training and education to the real needs of Rockford's employers and workers — current and future. That means the discussion won't fall into the trap of focusing exclusively on the highest-paying, highest-skill jobs — because that would leave too many in the local work force out.

It does mean finding ways to grow Rockford's economy for the long term, by creating and retaining jobs for workers of all skill levels. Just ask Mark Podemski of the Rockford Area

Economic Council. He insists that ultimately, the region's ability "to generate wealth long term is directly related to how thorough these efforts reach the most challenged segments of our population." The repeated emphasis on "long-term" solutions is intentional. For, while the recession has hit the Rockford area particularly hard, difficult economic times are not exactly a novel occurrence in the community — far from it.

The region has experienced a steady, decades-long decline in those bedrock manufacturing jobs that helped create, sustain and grow a strong, middle-class living for many families in the 1960s and 1970s.

Sure, the recession exacerbated this decline, but no strategy for moving forward has a chance of actually working, unless it takes into account the long-term, structural challenges that have manifested in the local economy as a result of everything from global competition to the shift from a production-based to a service-based economy.

So, if you're interested in accurately assessing the past as part of building the best approach to creating a better future, I'll see you Wednesday.

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